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ABSTRACT

The 14 Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA)-funded youth employment programs to which the Academy for Educational Development (AED) has delivered technical assistance for the past 5 years illustrate several important conditions for effective programming and "best practices" in the field of youth employment and training. Four of the JTPA youth employment programs (one each in the South Bronx and Brooklyn and two in Manhattan, New York), illustrate the importance of the following underlying principles: developing a clear mission to provide services with a clear focus on a particular group of young people and a firm belief that young people are resources to be developed; judging the quality of staff by their knowledge of their specialty/technical skills and their interpersonal skills with other staff, young people, and service/employment providers; and designing organizational structures that support the program's mission. In AED's experience, the following elements of a local network must be in place to facilitate, replicate, and support program change: research-driven principles; participation of administrators, instructors, and other staff; incentives for participation; examples of good practices provided through workshops and observations; opportunities for practitioner-led performances or exhibitions of good practice; and opportunities to discuss and advocate for changes or improvements in local youth employment policies. (MN)

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BUILDING ON BEST PRACTICES IN YOUTH EMPLOYMENT:

What works, How do we know, How do we sustain and replicate them

by

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BUILDING ON BEST PRACTICES IN YOUTH EMPLOYMENT:
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Beyond the Mechanical Model of Youth Employment

Youth employment training, like K-12 public education has outgrown its conceptual framework. The prevailing education model is that of the early 20th century factory, with its emphasis on large size for cost effectiveness, top-down bureaucratic control, and accountability to ensure standardization of practice. Similarly, in the youth employment field what Gary Walker calls a "mechanics model" has prevailed, in which various components have been tried, evaluated, and repackaged in mechanical fashion with limited success in improving youth employment (Walker, 1993). In education, the factory model of schooling remains in many schools but is undergoing major change through school-based, district and state reform efforts. There is growing recognition among educators that it is necessary to work, both school by school and systemically, to develop staff knowledge and skills; changes in instructional and assessment practices; school collaborations; and school organizational structures to support staff in new ways of teaching and relating to peers, students and parents.

This same fundamental rethinking of the conceptual framework must occur in the youth employment field. To address the employability needs of the most disadvantaged young people and develop practices that make a difference in their lives, youth employment policy needs to recognize that effective programming occurs in particular contexts with particular staff. Research must provide the field with an understanding of the contexts and staff characteristics that promote positive outcomes for young people. To date, research has focused on aggregate outcomes, paying little attention to implementation issues, to locally grown "best practices," or to the differences among programs and their relationship to youth outcomes (Hahn, 1992; Doolittle, 1994).

For the past five years, AED has conducted a project in New York City that has involved overall fourteen JTPA-funded youth employment programs, five of them for more than two years.

The project applied research findings and proven practices from the areas that we believe are most relevant to the development of good programming in youth employment. These areas included youth development, functional context literacy, labor force and skills projections, cognitive psychology, vocational and school-to-work transition programs, school change and organizational theory.

The project involved intensive staff development and technical assistance to programs. It was initiated and partially funded by the New York City Department of Employment. One of the project's major goals was to create staff and program buy-in into research-based practices and to institutionalize these practices through a network of local staff. The project provided monetary incentives to encourage program participation and compensate for staff time required to attend workshops, revise curriculum, and report on changes in instruction and other programming to other participants. However, AED believes that the project would not have succeeded without an intrinsic motivation on the part of staff to participate--mainly their perception that program changes would benefit young people and themselves. This motivation was key in the programs that most successfully implemented AED project principles. Three of these programs fundamentally rethought their program and made changes in practices resulting in improved attendance, retention and educational outcomes. Two other programs, where staff were also highly motivated, have a commitment on the leadership level to implement the project ideas, but, because of high staff turnover and other organizational problems, they have been less effective in achieving project goals.

This paper will examine some of the "best practices" that are needed in youth employment programs to promote the achievement of the higher level, comprehensive skills advocated in reports such as SCANS. We will discuss the conditions that supported these practices in some of the programs and undermined them in others. In a final section we discuss the elements of a local practitioners' network that AED created. We argue that such local networks, when informed by research driven data, are essential to developing, disseminating and sustaining best practices in the youth employment field.

Best Practices from the Field

In an article on implementation issues in youth employment, "Managing Youth Employment Program for At-Risk Youth: Lessons from Research and Practical Experiences" (1922), Andrew Hahn discusses four categories that characterize the practices in service industries, arguing that youth employment programs can be seen as a type of service organization. These categories include:

- Targeting the client: youth served and how recruited
- Defining a service concept: the central mission of the program
- Service delivery: all the front-line activities, including counseling, case management, instruction, job development
- Operating strategies: aspects of program management that support the service concept (Hahn, 1992).

In AED's five-year experience delivering technical assistance to New York City JTPA programs, we have identified three major areas that correlate with the development and implementation of effective practices. These overlap and encompass the categories of service organizations described above. They include:

1. **A clear mission**, similar to the service concept, which includes a definition of which youth the program serves, the outcomes that it wants young people to achieve; and the strategies that it uses to attain these outcomes
2. **The quality of the staff**, judged by their knowledge of their specialty and technical skills and their interpersonal skills with other staff, young people, and people outside the organization who provide services or employment for the participants
3. **Organizational structures** that support the program mission.

These conditions for effective programming are similar to those identified in the Quantum Opportunities Project, a comprehensive youth initiative developed for very poor eighth graders and conducted by the Heller Graduate School at Brandeis University. It involved a mix of services delivered after school, in the summer and continuing through high school. Participating sites were

given a list of twenty-five students chosen at random from eighth graders' families receiving AFDC. Sites varied in their ability to attract and retain young people. The major research finding was that

> the varying success of the programs in recruiting youngsters has more to do with the quality of the staff, the availability of an effective service concept, and mundane management considerations than the nature of poverty in the community, the characteristics of the children, the service design or other "external" variables. (Hahn, op. cit., 1992, p. 27).

This finding corroborates what we have found to be true of the three most successful implementors of the AED project principles and practices.

The following vignettes describe how these variables look in practice in four effective youth employment programs. Three of the programs participated in the AED project for at least two years. One of the programs is not part of the project, but is also located in New York City. Unlike the three programs that participated in AED's technical assistance project, it does not receive JTPA funds.

Four Program Vignettes: Effective Practices in Action

Vignette 1

Program A is housed in a South Bronx multi-service agency with a twenty-five year history of delivering substance abuse services, including an on-site adult residential treatment center and day programs for youth. Drawing its enrollment largely from African-American and Latino residents of the neighborhood, the agency requires all staff members and participants to commit to daily "Family Group" meetings as part of the agency's well-articulated mission to address the substance abuse epidemic that plagues the neighborhood. At the start of each morning, participants meet in fixed, small groups for half an hour with an assigned staff member who may be an instructor, counselor, or even a secretary, who shepherds his or her group through the training cycle, offering a consistent, personal adult contact outside the classroom environment.

One group discusses a local problem that worries them: the emergence of cocaine delivery services that respond to phone inquiries as a means of avoiding police surveillance of street-level drug trafficking. On other mornings, participants are encouraged to offer feedback on the quality and content of their instruction as part of the program's emphasis on involving youth in assessing the program's effectiveness. Such institutionalized opportunities for participants to discuss programmatic, personal, and community issues typify Program A's commitment to achieving participant outcomes that transcend narrowly defined skills training and to perceiving youth as a resource for enhancing program quality.

For the site's building maintenance training component, Program A devised a creative means of attracting a vocational instructor with extensive professional experience and contacts with major city contractors and union officials. The program combined the vocational instructor's position with that of facilities director, and was able to offer a salary more competitive with industry standards. As a result, the building maintenance participants receive daily exposure to the tasks of maintaining their eighty-year-old school building and other facilities managed by the agency. In addition, the instructor's professional contacts are invaluable to placing participants in internships and permanent jobs.

Vignette II

JTPA Program B, located in Brooklyn, has an institutional history of drawing on techniques derived from theatrical training as means of developing communication skills in participants; three key staff members have been with the program for more than ten years, and all three are currently active in community-based theatrical productions.

The program has participated in the AED project for five years and is a demonstration program. Over the years it has reconfigured its staff and introduced many innovative educational practices. It typically begins a training cycle with a two-day orientation in which prospective students

participate in a variety of learning activities, through which staff are able to assess participant skills, strengths and needs. No tests are administered until after the initial staff assessments have been made. For the first six weeks, young people participate in and learn about all three occupational areas offered by the program. At the end of six weeks, they present a portfolio of their accomplishments; the portfolio includes a paper presenting reasons for their selection of one vocational area as a major.

Program B's director has played a key role in identifying and orienting new staff and coordinating curriculum development that is linked to the copier repair industry's standards and expectations. In 1993, Program B hired a copier repair instructor with extensive networks in the copier repair industry, but little previous classroom experience. Before the new instructor's first cycle, Program B's JTPA director facilitated curriculum planning meetings for which the academic, vocational, and employability instructors drafted course overviews that were shared and discussed with the goal of integrating instructional objectives.

As part of Program B's culminating performance-assessment demonstration, the participants from the copier repair component described the results of their investigation of the copier repair industry. With assistance from their vocational instructor, the participants had compiled a directory of seventy-five Manhattan-based copier repair businesses, twenty of which were selected for telephone and in-house interviews that the participants synthesized into a fifty-page document. As a result of the contacts made through this project, students were regularly invited to accompany technicians on service calls.

To promote staff development in assessment and contextual instruction, AED encouraged Program B's instructors to observe exemplary teaching practices in other contexts--for example, visiting alternative high schools where the JTPA instructors participated in performance assessment demonstrations and portfolio evaluations and observed new applications of computer technologies.

Vignette III

Program C in Manhattan targets its recruitment to a specific slice of the eligible youth population: parenting teens and teens interested in careers in early childhood development. Funded by the city, Program C offers young people classroom training followed by internships in daycare centers throughout the city. Program C's child care training component was designed and initially taught by a recognized early childhood development specialist drawn from the city's university system.

A typical class focuses on finger painting which provides hands-on experiences for the participants as a means of exploring this early childhood activity; later in the day, the participants observe the same activity in the school's daycare center and then return to the classroom to write a chapter for their individual early childhood manuals entitled, "Using Messy Materials." Creating these manuals draws on the students academic, vocational, and computer skills and allows them to reflect on both their first-hand experience and workplace observation. When participants complete their training and begin their program's internship phase, they bring their manuals to demonstrate the content of their training to their supervisors. As the majority of participants are parents themselves, their training in childcare also informs their own parenting perspective, an outcome expressly supported by program staff.

Vignette IV

JTPA Program D in Manhattan targets its services to young people with mental and developmental disabilities as part of its parent agency's long history of providing job training, counseling, and placement services to youth and adults with disabling conditions. Reflecting the agency's commitment to developing self-sufficiency among the youth with disabilities, JTPA Program D provides extended, intensive practice in the communication and interpersonal skills needed to succeed at job interviews and in the workplace. One project developed by the academic and

vocational skills instructors engages the participants in writing and filming their own videotape entitled, "Dealing with Prejudice in the Workplace." The activity is highly motivational and particularly relevant for the female African-American and Latina participants who regularly confront negative comments that relate to their gender, ethnicity, and disabling conditions in the large public hospital where the participants are trained in janitorial services. Participants share their experiences and strategies for negotiating complicated interpersonal relationships in the workplace. This activity reflects several of the program's targeted outcomes, including developing self-confidence, communication, and technical skills, as the participants use computer and video technology to develop the interpersonal skills that are necessary for success in contemporary workplaces.

A Conceptual Framework for Good Practices

In many respects these programs are atypical: in all but one case they were part of a larger agency with a history of serving a particular group of youth or adults well. These well-established agencies draw funds from diverse sources, and this provides a financial cushion for their youth employment programs in the event that they do not meet performance goals. These agencies are able to pay higher salaries than is possible in most youth employment programs and therefore attract more qualified staff--certified teachers and counselors and professionals in a vocational field. They also have significantly less staff turnover than in most youth employment programs. These conditions are not the norm in most youth employment programs.

Another advantage enjoyed by these programs included their participation in the AED project, which offered intensive staff development for both managers and staff and made possible the introduction of research-based practices from other relevant fields. Despite these positive factors, staff in these programs still felt restrained by the limitations of the JTPA program and would argue, as do most practitioners, that the current JTPA system impedes, rather than promotes or facilitates, good practice.

The reasons cited are many and familiar. They include narrowly defined program performance criteria that encourage "creaming" of participants. Because of the performance criteria, many JTPA programs do not take into consideration the broader definitions of employability, currently advocated by businesses and policy makers, nor provide flexible time frames to meet young people's developmental and educational needs. Budget constraints result in a lack of funds for appropriate program administration and staffing, and the bureaucratic nature of program accountability entails masses of paper work that has no relevance to assessing young people's development nor to effective programming. Other impediments include the lack of contact with other fields relevant to programming; the lack of professional standards, accreditation, and staff development for youth employment staff, and the lack of research-driven practice.

Despite the limitations of JTPA, and with the help of the AED project, participating programs implemented many positive practices that benefitted young people. AED believes that these qualities and practices must be part of any effective youth employment program. They are summarized below:

Mission

- **Program has a clear focus on a particular group of young people** and agency expertise in addressing the needs of these young people.
- **Program sees youth as resources to be developed**--not as collections of problems to be fixed-- evidenced by such practices as structured opportunities to discuss youth issues, the inclusion of young people in the program's decision- and rule-making, and opportunities to explore a variety of career interests.
- **Program has a clear focus on developing young people as learners**, demonstrated by the development of curriculum that is conceptually rich and based on young people's prior knowledge and vocational interests.
- **Program has a clear focus on helping young people develop employability skills**, including higher order thinking skills, familiarity with a wide variety of workplaces through internships and investigations, interpersonal skills developed through group projects that are academically and socially challenging and result in real and useful products, including products that could be used in obtaining jobs.

Staff Quality and Commitment

- Staff are selected for their expertise in vocational or basic skills and for their ability to provide stable and caring relationships with young people.
- Staff are given multiple opportunities for professional development, through projects such as AED's technical assistance initiative, but also through program-planned orientations for new staff.
- Staff receive competitive salaries and supportive working conditions, including materials needed for teaching.
- Staff development is based on research-driven models and all relevant educational practice (the integration of academic and vocational curricula and instruction; contextual education; authentic assessment, using portfolios and exhibitions of learning; and innovative use of technology to enhance learning).

Organizational Characteristics

- Program culture is respectful of young people and clear in expectations.
- Staff are given sufficient time to plan and improve the program; all are full-time employees and adequately compensated.
- Directors understand the qualities of effective staff and make an effort to hire suitable people for all aspects of the program. Directors understand the day-to-day demands of working with young people and hire staff that can meet these demands.
- Directors provide leadership in curriculum planning and find resources for the programs and funnel them into classroom materials and staff development.
- Directors make linkages with employers who provide internships and employment. In addition, they hire vocational instructors who bring contacts with them and are helpful in placing young people in internships and jobs.
- Directors are able to meet the bureaucratic accountability demands of JTPA in ways that are protective of staff and recognize that meeting these demands is not the heart of their job.

Nourishing, Sustaining, and Replicating Best Practices

In its work in New York City, AED was guided by school change literature and research demonstrating the importance of staff collaboration in developing and sustaining effective instructional practices. The school change literature led us to emphasize local staff buy-in and the adaptation of project ideas to individual program needs and strengths. In developing a local network of

practitioners, we were guided by the experiences of other networks, for example the New York City and San Francisco Writing Projects and the Coalition for Essential Schools. Support for the concept of a network of local practitioners tied to a larger, research-based and policy organization also came from a Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) publication on replication by Rick DeLone, *Replication: A Strategy to Improve the Delivery of Education and Job Training Programs*. In this publication, DeLone argued that replication strategies would differ greatly depending on the context in which a program is to be replicated. To obtain "institutional change in bureaucratically and professionally dense environments" such as schools or businesses, loosely specified, process-oriented strategies must be designed and adapted locally (DeLone, 1990). Most youth employment programs are situated in bureaucratically, if not professionally, dense environments. Therefore, attempts to redesign youth employment programs require the kind of process-oriented strategies that have been found to be effective in such school reform efforts as the Accelerated School Project or and the Coalition of Essential Schools.

In AED's experience, the following elements of a local network need to be in place in order to bring about, replicate and support program change:

1. **Research-driven principles** that are general enough to encompass and encourage local adaptation. These principles might be developed by SDAs following research summaries from DOL and through consultation with local experts in relevant fields. The principles should address youth development; good teaching and learning; assessment; employment preparation; and organizational structure.

   In AED's work with programs, we developed principles that were drawn from the relevant literature on youth development; literacy; employability analyses and school-to-work transition programs; cognitive psychology; and research in organizational theory and school change. Although the formulation of the principles changed somewhat over time, the basic elements remained the same. In order to develop buy-in into the project, programs must participate in workshops to understand these principles and develop individual plans for program changes that indicate their understanding of them. The principles ground the project and form the basis for program accountability.

2. **The participation of administrators, instructors and other staff**. It is essential that program staff have opportunities for professional renewal outside their own programs. Program and staff isolation is one of the most critical problems in the youth

development and youth employment field, and seriously undermines attempts at developing quality programming. In the AED project there were joint meetings of program managers with other staff and specialized meetings for instructors.

It is also vital to include young people in the network. They bring invaluable expertise to the process of improving program quality;young people know what is effective teaching and can identify the characteristics of effective staff. Their views and perspectives should inform practice. Inclusion of young people also provides an opportunity for leadership development.

3. **Incentives for participation** in professional development networks, including providing program resources and materials, stipends, and graduate credits. In the AED project, participating programs received funds that were used to pay staff for additional work outside their usual responsibilities and for materials, such as computers and scanners that enhanced service delivery.

4. **Examples of good practices** provided through workshops and observations. These should be provided in ways that are not threatening to practitioners. For example, it is not useful to demonstrate program practices in "Cadillac" programs. It is more useful to invite observation and discussion about program improvements in progress so that participants do not feel threatened and everyone can learn from the experience.

5. **Opportunities for performances or exhibitions of good practice** led by participants. These are highly motivating for the participants and make visible good practice for a larger audience. The exhibitions provide opportunities to reach wider audiences than are normally included in the network, and to articulate the principles of good practice through practical demonstrations that provide participants with opportunities to develop their skills in synthesis, organization, and presentation, and to receive acknowledgement and praise from a supportive audience.

   In the AED project at the end of each year of the project, programs were required to present the changes they had made in their programs to a larger audience consisting of their peers from all of the youth employment programs in they city. In many ways this was a highlight of the year; the public exposure motivated programs to try their best, and the friendly competition between programs inspired best performances.

6. **Opportunities to discuss and advocate for changes or improvements in local youth employment policies**, including the setting of performance standards and program accountability. Although this was not a major focus of the AED network, these issues were frequently addressed. It is the focus of the New York City Employment Coalition. We believe that policy advocacy and program improvement should be addressed by the same network.

These six aspects of our network could have been greatly enhanced by other features--most notably, telecommunication among programs and practitioners. This would have afforded the opportunity to exchange ideas and materials, discuss best practices, and involve young people in

cutting-edge technologies. Although programs were not in telecommunication with one another, AED did encourage the use of videotaping to communicate best practices, and found that it was a very effective way to demonstrate what programs and young people were doing. Young people were involved in the production of videos about projects and this was also an excellent way to develop their skills. AED also developed its own staff development video, comprised of interviews with teachers and participants.

Changes Since Implementation

Just as youth employment programs must change to respond to the needs of youth, so the AED project changed to better serve the needs of our participating programs. Specifically, since implementing this project, we have added some elements that have greatly strengthened the model. One was identifying those programs that had made the most progress in implementing project principles as demonstration programs and allowing them to assume leadership roles in the network. Specifically, these exemplary programs became the sites for network meetings, which allowed participating staff to witness best practices and question the instructors and youth involved. Another major change was the inclusion of young people in network meetings and final exhibitions, as described above. These youth made moving and useful contributions to network meetings. Because of the emphasis in the AED project on integration of vocational and academic skills, on communication skills, and on exhibitions of learning, each year there were several groups of young people who were able to demonstrate what they had learned and answer questions about their programs. Nothing is more convincing to dedicated practitioners than hearing young people present their work and describe their experiences in a learning project. Such experiences for practitioners are worth thousands of words.

Another change that took place over the life of the project was the expansion of the network both to include more participants, but also more activities and resources. This occurred as our

understanding of its importance in fostering change in youth employment programs increased. The concept of the local network acknowledges that there is no one good model for such programs. Given the range of young people's needs and goals, there must be a variety of youth employment programs and approaches to meet these needs. Rather than a top-down series of mandates, we envision programs around the country that, while embracing certain core principles of youth development, teaching and learning, and organizational structure, will look very different, reflecting the local economy, the expertise of local people, the history of local youth work and organizations, and the needs and characteristics of the young people in the community. These programs will be sustained by networks of practitioners who are engaged in examining their programs through the lenses of accepted principles of good practice and clearly articulated youth outcomes. These networks will provide opportunities for continuous reflection and change, and, through this process, make youth employment a more valued and respected field.

The costs of creating local networks are not great. They are certainly much less than the costs of allowing many current programs--programs that neither work for most young people nor attract qualified staff--to continue. Like hardy plants that flourish through pavement cracks, exemplary programs and practices do exist in New York City and other localities. Rather than having a few aberrant plants, we envision a variety of flowers, sown in fertile soil and tended by knowledgeable and talented gardeners, who are enriched and supported by their local network.